

# Week 5 | Romans 2:17–29

One of my favorite children’s books is *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss. It starts like this:

*Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches  
Had bellies with stars.  
The Plain-Belly Sneetches  
Had none upon thars.*

*Those stars weren't so big. They were really so small  
You might think such a thing wouldn't matter at all.*

If you’re familiar with the story you know that those small stars mattered a great deal to the Sneetches. The Sneetches with stars excluded the ones without, treating them as an unworthy group of starless castoffs. An enterprising businessman comes to town with a machine that can put a star on anyone’s belly, for a fee. Suddenly anyone can have a star! Of course, this doesn’t make the original star-bellied Sneetches happy at all. They have lost the thing that gave them power over others. In the story, the businessman begins making a lot of money *removing* stars so certain Sneetches can once again feel superior to the others.

Even though Dr. Seuss wrote this story for kids, it resonates with all of us because this basic narrative is timeless. Human societies love to differentiate themselves from other groups and find reasons to exclude, judge, and discriminate. Those in the “in group” will often oppose the inclusion of those they deem unworthy. This is true today and it was true in ancient Rome. In the section of Romans we’re reading this week, we’ll see this impulse at play and consider how contrary to Jesus’ gospel it is. In Christ, God is redeeming fallen sinners, none more valuable than another, and bringing them into one unified family.

## Day 1

We’re about half way through this section of Romans and well on our way to the verses where Paul expounds on the good news of what God has done for humanity through Jesus Christ. But, we’re not there yet. We’re still wading through the “bad news” that will help us appreciate the gospel even more.

The core message we discovered in Romans 1:18–32 is that sin is serious and all of humanity is guilty. Romans 2:1–16 insists that God does not play favorites; all people will be judged by what they have done, and that includes his covenant people. In our central passage this week, Romans 2:17–29, Paul is still focused on a Jewish sense of entitlement based on their special relationship with God. Paul is dealing with some Jewish objections that he’s probably heard during his travels across the empire and that he knows exist in Rome as well.

As you read through our central passage, once again imagine that you are a Jewish follower of Jesus. Having experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, you've joyfully accepted that Jesus is your Messiah, but you're struggling to understand all the implications. In light of the gospel, how you should understand the law of Moses and the covenants that Yahweh formed with the Jewish people? Perhaps you've had conversations with some of your fellow Jews who've stubbornly refused to accept Gentiles into the Christian worship community. Now you're hearing this letter read aloud and you sense that Paul is talking directly to your stubborn kin.

## Read the Word

### Romans 2:17–29 (NIV)

*<sup>17</sup> Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; <sup>18</sup> if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; <sup>19</sup> if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—<sup>21</sup> you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? <sup>24</sup> As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”*

*<sup>25</sup> Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. <sup>26</sup> So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? <sup>27</sup> The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.*

*<sup>28</sup> A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.*

## Reflect

- Circle all the question marks. Where do you see Paul using a string of rhetorical questions? What is their effect?
- We'll talk more about it this week, but what do you already know about circumcision? (If you have time, read Genesis 17:1–14 where God prescribes circumcision as a sign of the covenant.)
- Imagine you are a Jewish Christian who is really struggling to accept Gentiles. Which verses in this passage would be the most convicting?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I love you and trust you. Thank you for your Spirit who is transforming me. I do not want to be a hypocrite, but someone who is truly seeking to obey you. I would never want to bring shame on your name by my conduct, but I want to reflect your love and goodness in my daily life.*

## Day 2

This week we're continuing to track Paul's argument in Romans 2. He's challenging some dangerous assumptions held by his fellow Jews regarding their privileged position before God. It's not surprising that the Jewish people would assume they enjoyed God's favor. They were a people birthed by God's miraculous intervention in the lives of Abraham and Sarah when he gave the couple a son, Isaac. Through a series of covenants, God bound himself to Abraham's line. He promised to make these descendants into a great nation and give them a land of their own. Through Moses he gave the people the law that told them how to live and the tabernacle where his presence would dwell. To their king David he promised an eternal kingdom.

The Jewish people thought they were special, because they were. But what many had failed to realize is that God intended the blessings of Israel to spill over into the rest of the world. The Jewish people were to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6). As you read through Romans 2:17–24, notice how Paul acknowledges their special role, but indicts them for their failure to live it out.

## Read the Word

### Romans 2:17–24 (NIV)

*<sup>17</sup> Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; <sup>18</sup> if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; <sup>19</sup> if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—<sup>21</sup> you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? <sup>24</sup> As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

- Circle the word "if" in these verses. An "if" is usually followed by a "then." Where do you finally see the "then"? What point is Paul making with these statements?

- In verse 24, Paul quotes Isaiah 52:5. Why would this charge be hard for his fellow Jews to hear?

## Reflect

If I were to ask you what you remember from the book of Exodus, you'd probably mention one of many incredible stories in the book like the burning bush, the plagues of Egypt, the Red Sea crossing. Most of us don't immediately recall the large number of chapters right in the middle of this book that recount the giving of the law. But a good Jew in Paul's day would. The law was a tremendous gift because it revealed God's character, told them what he expected of them and how they could come into his presence. The law set them apart as the people of God.

In verses 17–20 Paul highlights several privileges enjoyed by the Jewish people related to the law. Through the law they were privy to God's will which should have made them wise guides for those stumbling in the dark without knowledge of their Creator. Knowing God's ways and following his will should produce people who resemble God's character. Yet many of the Jewish religious leaders used the law to burden the people while failing to follow it themselves.

Matthew records Jesus making a similar critique to the one Paul is making here:

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:1–4).*

Paul finishes his line of thought in Romans 2:17–24 with a zinger from Isaiah. Not only were God's chosen people just as guilty of sin and rebellion as the Gentiles they held in contempt, they were bringing dishonor on God with their hypocritical behavior. "In Isaiah, the blaspheming of God's name occurs through the oppression of Israel, God's chosen people, by foreign powers. Paul ascribes the cause of the blasphemy to the disobedient lives of his people."<sup>1</sup> Paul asserts that it is not Gentile invaders bringing shame on the name of Yahweh, but God's own people.

Of course, Jesus is the only one who has ever obeyed the Father completely, so we must rely on his righteousness to make us right with God. He did what Israel could not do, reflect God's character in all its truth, beauty and goodness. There is an irony in the gospel. Through enduring a shameful death, Jesus brings ultimate honor to God.

As Christians, we now proclaim the name of Jesus. Let's not bring shame on that precious name with our hypocrisy. We have been charged by our Lord to be a light to the world

---

<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, [\*The Epistle to the Romans\*](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 166.

(Matthew 5:14). By the Spirit's power, we are to shine Jesus' love, mercy, grace and truth into a dark world and invite people into the family of God. Let's take that charge seriously.

- Is there a way you could bring dishonor to Jesus' name? Is there some secret sin in your life that if revealed would reflect badly on your Savior? Ask the Spirit to give you the will to stop whatever it is. Seek God's forgiveness and repent.
- Are you living as a light to world? What are some practical ways you can display the goodness of God in your everyday life?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, you have given me so much. In Christ I enjoy blessings that seem too good to be true. I know YOU, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. I don't want to take that knowledge for granted but allow it to change my life. I want to be a light that shines brightly for you. Use me to draw people to you and bring you honor. Show me where I need to grow and change and I will yield to your Spirit so that you can accomplish your will in me.*

## Day 3

In Romans, Paul is challenging some common assumptions by first century Jews about how one becomes part of God's people. Is it by being a physical descendent of Abraham? Is it following the Torah? Is it following certain rites like circumcision? Many Jews living in Paul's day would have answered with a hearty "yes." In Romans, Paul explains why he disagrees and chapter 2 begins this explanation.

As we discussed yesterday, God had given Israel special blessings, but not so they could lord over or look down on the rest of the world. They were to be a light to the nations and Paul insists that they have failed in this vocation. Now Paul turns his attention to the rite of circumcision — another sign of the unique relationship God had with the people of Israel.

## Read the Word

**Romans 2:25–27 (NIV)**

*<sup>25</sup> Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. <sup>26</sup> So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? <sup>27</sup> The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.*

- According to Paul, under what circumstances does circumcision have value?
- If you haven't yet, take a moment to read Genesis 17:1–14. It provides helpful context for these verses.

## Reflect

Circumcision was a physical sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham. All of Abraham's male descendants were to be circumcised, showing that they were part of the covenant people. For Jews in Paul's day, circumcision was a badge of Jewish identity that set them apart from the pagan culture surrounding them. In Romans 2:17–29, Paul brings circumcision and the law together, declaring that circumcision only means what God intended it to mean if the Torah is kept.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a man who wore a wedding ring but was sexually intimate with other women and only saw his wife once a year. A wedding ring is supposed to be a sign of a loving commitment, but in this case, it would be an empty symbol because no real marriage relationship exists. Paul's point in Romans 2:26–28 is that circumcision only means something if it is a true symbol of a faithful commitment to God. You demonstrate this commitment, not with visible symbols, but by keeping his law. Merely bearing the sign of the covenant does not make you part of it. Likewise, demonstrating a faithful commitment to God by obeying his law could make you one of God's people, at least hypothetically, without bearing the sign. It's not the symbol that matters, it's the relationship to which it points.

These verses are Paul's opening statement in an argument he will develop for the next few chapters and complete in Romans 9–11. For now, Paul is introducing the idea that a new category of people has emerged, formed by Jesus' work on the cross. These are the people of God drawn from every nation, not just Israel, and ruled over by his Spirit, not the law. In these verses he is not outlining a way of salvation that comes from law-keeping but warning his fellow Jews that covenant privileges won't save anyone.

- Think about symbols or signs of Christianity that are prevalent now. Things like wearing a cross, listening to Christian radio, or serving at church. Are there others you can think of?
- Do you see any danger that some Christians could rely on those symbols for their identity rather than the relationship with God that they are supposed to reflect? Do you ever do this?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I want my relationship with you to be deep, real and affect every area of my life. I want to live out my commitment to you with love and humility. Don't*

---

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, "Romans," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* 10, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 363.

*let me rely on outward symbols of my faith. Let them be true reflections of my heart for you.*

## Day 4

It might be hard for us to relate to now, but debate over whether Gentile followers of Jesus should be circumcised caused considerable controversy in the early church. After all, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Christ's earliest disciples did not think of themselves as initiators of a brand-new religion, but rather reformers of Judaism in light of the gospel. It's understandable that there was some initial confusion over the necessity of a rite that was so closely associated with God's covenant relationship with his people.

In Romans, as he does in Colossians and particularly in Galatians, Paul deals with the question of circumcision. Here in Romans he forces his detractors to consider what circumcision really reveals.

### Read the Word

#### Romans 2:28–29 (NIV)

*<sup>28</sup> A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.*

- According to Paul, what makes someone a Jew?
- How do you think Jewish Christians would have reacted to his assertion?

### Reflect

Along with dietary restrictions and Sabbath-keeping, circumcision was an important identity marker for the Jewish people. But Paul is clear that when it comes to the final judgment, God will not play favorites. Verses 28–29 explain why circumcision alone doesn't save and also why salvation is possible without it. "Though God's verdict is based on 'works,' these works reveal the inner reality of a person's heart relationship to God."<sup>3</sup>

Paul asserts that what really matters is a circumcision of the heart – something spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures more than once. For example, Deuteronomy 10:16 says, "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." (See also Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4) Metaphorically speaking, heart circumcision is an internal operation that cures stubbornness and brings a healthy sensitivity to God and his will.

---

<sup>3</sup> Moo, 173.

In Ezekiel, God promises that, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” Some scholars believe that in these verses, Paul could be drawing from this Old Testament idea as well. Paul is “talking, in traditional Jewish language, about the renewal of the covenant, and claiming that it has taken place in and through God’s spirit. He has not mentioned Jesus in this passage, but it is clear that he understands this new covenant to be the direct result of God’s action through his Messiah.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul does speak directly about Jesus when he uses circumcision language in his letter to the Colossians to explain the work of God in the hearts of those who put their faith in Christ:

*When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. (Colossians 2:11–13, NLT).*

- Yesterday we thought about symbols of Christianity that people might use to define their identity. Today think about the kind of life a true circumcision of the heart would produce. How would they differ?
- How does your life reveal the kind of spiritual transformation Paul talks about in Colossians 2?

## Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, praise you for changing my heart! Thank you that I have been freed from my sinful nature, raised to new life and included in your covenant family. I want my life to reflect this radical transformation. Teach me to live like you want me to live.*

## Day 5

It’s Friday! We’ve thought carefully about Romans 2 this week. Now spend some time with the Father reflecting on what you’ve learned and how you might apply it to your life.

## Consider what you’ve learned

---

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wright, [\*Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1: Chapters 1-8\*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 41–42.

Let's review. Go back and read all of Romans chapter 2.

- What have you learned about the context in which this chapter was written? List one or two problems or concerns that Paul is addressing?
- Now what timeless principles might you draw from this chapter? How does it shape the way you see God and how we should relate to him? Write down at least one major principle that you will take away from these verses.

## **Make Connections**

In Christ we have been given unfathomable blessings. We are adopted into the family of God, we've been given the Word and the Spirit to guide us, we can talk to our Father at any time, we are forgiven and freed from sin, we have protection against the enemy, we will overcome death and spend eternity with Jesus and each other, and much more. We should joyfully live into these blessings and freely share them with others.

Unfortunately, outsiders don't always perceive believers as joyful or generous. Christians can have a reputation for being holier-than-thou while not practicing what they preach. Instead of being lights to the world that point people to Jesus, his followers are often perceived as humorless scolds who only find joy in condemning others. If we are living as hypocrites, we will dishonor the name of Jesus.

In suburban America we have the privilege of displaying our faith. We can put fish on our cars and crosses above our doors. We can send our kids to Christian schools and vote for churchgoing candidates. But those privileges won't save us or make us holy. Only our relationship with Jesus accomplishes that. Our faith does not make us better than other people, but it should make us a whole lot more humble and grateful. We know what we deserved and what Jesus rescued us from. We should want that same salvation for everyone. To the outside world, we earn the right to share our faith as we live it out.

## **Pray**

Based on what you've read and reflected on this week, take extended time to pray. To help you get started, here are a few prompts based on our passage for the week. Pray the ones that reflect the desire of your heart and add your own.

- Ask God to make you a true "guide to the blind" and "light for those who are in the dark" because you know him and follow his Word (Romans 2:19).
- Ask God to reveal any hypocrisy in your life or ways you might bring dishonor on his name (Romans 2:21–24).
- Praise God that he has circumcised your heart. Ask him to show you what that means for you (Romans 2:29).

## **What's Your Next Step?**

What we're seeing so far in Romans is that a superficial faith is just not enough. Paul had such a deep relationship with the Lord and such an abiding connection to Christ that he risked his life to share the gospel. Many Jews had relied upon symbols of their covenant without living out that covenant.

Perhaps God is moving you to a deeper commitment to him. How can you grow in faith and live out the implications of the gospel? Pray about what that would look like, ask for the Spirit's guidance, and then record some changes you will make this week.